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White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness

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BOOK REVIEW

WHITE MEN ON RACE: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE SHAPING OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

BY JOE FEAGIN AND EILEEN O'BRIEN. BEACON PRESS. ISBN 0807009806.

*Reviewed By Jaqueline Lee**

Well, you're almost becoming extinct, like the dinosaur. I feel you're at a disadvantage today if you're white and a male."¹

"I don't like affirmative action, because I wouldn't...want my accountant to be someone who passed his accountancy examination because he got an extra ten points because he was a black person or a green person or a purple person."²

Numerous confessions and assertions like these are the basis of Joe Feagin and Eileen O'Brien's sociological study, *White Men On Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness*. Feagin and O'Brien gathered interviews of close to one hundred wealthy, upper-class white males, drawn from a diverse array of occupations in government, politics, academia, and corporate America, and invoked their candid opinions on a wide range of racial issues from affirmative action to interracial relationships.

While the responses are predictable and reinforce the unquestionable fact that racial equality in this nation is still an unattained vision, Feagin and O'Brien's study is nevertheless a valuable tool for social change, as it sheds an incisive light on the way that America's power players either shape or fail to create opportunities to help racial minorities progress. The authors acknowledge that although modern racism is not so blatant as it was several decades ago during the Civil Rights era, racial prejudices and misunderstandings are still deeply ingrained in people's minds, and are expressed more subtly.

It is this subtlety, state Feagin and O'Brien, with which the reader should be concerned. Although America increasingly upholds political correctness and many people feel that they themselves are not intentionally racist, subconsciously imprinted prejudices often manifest in covert ways that affect African-Americans as considerably as overt acts of prejudice would. Understanding and addressing these subtleties is essential to changing the white population's outlook on racial problems in America.

The authors are careful to illustrate that the interviewees hold very diverse opinions, some much more perceptive and empathetic than others, but the authors' theory that these rich and powerful men frequently deny involvement in racial discrimination and are unwilling to take proactive measures to end it is evi-

dent throughout their analysis.

White Men On Race is principally a black-white dialogue. The interviewees occasionally offer their views on Hispanics and Asians, but do so more in the context of comparing these groups to African-Americans. The interviewees' lack of interaction with either Hispanics or Asians is evident, as their comments reflect the stereotype of these groups as model minorities, which some of the interviewees believe African-Americans should emulate. Such a fundamentally erroneous belief as this is a recurring theme in the book; a good number of the respondents feel that racial discrimination is not created by the white majority, but is self-imposed and perpetuated by African-Americans.

Feagin and O'Brien note that the majority of the interviewees have spent significantly little personal time with African-Americans, or have interacted with them solely in a hierarchical employer-employee relationship. The absence or imbalance of such relationships is a principal factor in determining the kinds of views that the interviewees hold. With the exception of the responses of a few civil rights activists and men who have multi-racial families, the majority of the interviewees' views lie on a spectrum between ultra-traditionalist and moderate. Although the authors do not disclose personal details about the interviewees except for their occupations, the men's responses implicitly reveal their age, and thus the period of time in which their childhood impressions of blacks were formed. Generally, as one may expect, the older generations, which grew up prior to the Civil Rights era, tend to harbor the more conservative views. On the other hand, the responses of moderate opinion holders reveal that their subconscious prejudices against blacks were removed when they developed a personal relationship with an African-American who was an equal counterpart, whether a classmate, an athletic teammate, or a colleague. Unfortunately, Feagin and O'Brien discern that some of these personal relationships did not initially have a genuine foundation. In striving to fit in, the authors describe how African-Americans made a conscious effort to appear non-threatening to whites by constantly maintaining a smiling, friendly exterior. Without this veneer of approachability, the desire of whites to interact with blacks would have been far less likely.

Feagin categorizes the less conservative, more open-minded

respondents as passing through three stages: first, sympathy for the racial discrimination experienced by blacks, second, empathy, and finally “autopathy.”³ Very few of the interviewees seem to have reached the stage of autopathy, which Feagin defines as a stage where a person actually experiences some of the pain of racial intolerance.

Not surprisingly, the men discuss how they have very seldom needed to reflect on their white ethnicity, although many of them do recognize that being white affords them a privilege over other races. Consequently, the reader receives the impression that many of the men have never seriously contemplated or openly discussed the issue of racism before. Feagin and O’Brien’s thought-provoking interviews appear to be the first opportunity that these men have had to voice their true feelings publicly. Interestingly, although it may be their first opportunity, many of them quickly and defensively jump to the conclusion that the wearying issue of a racial divide is not a situation that is their fault or that they can change, but is rather the responsibility of the victims of racial discrimination. The issue seems wearying to them, because they have not been victims of racism, yet they feel constantly bombarded with reminders of America’s racial problems by the media and by government policies that attempt to rectify past discriminations. Affirmative action is, for many of them, a sobering first confrontation that forces them to realize what it is like to be judged by one’s race.

By examining the responses of the interviewees, opponents of racial discrimination can get a good sense of the issues where greater education is required to change people’s views, particu-

larly those people who have the power to create an impetus for change. However, the reader is left with the sense that racial integration and forging strong interracial relationships, rather than education, is a more effective means for change.

The authors conclude that the currently declining proportion of whites and the simultaneous “browning of America,” as well as increasing numbers of other minorities, will inevitably force both perpetrators and victims of racial discrimination to reexamine and readjust their beliefs in order to function effectively in this changing society. In progressing towards an optimistic multiracial future, Feagin and O’Brien advocate a proliferation of multiracial organizations that directly fight racial oppression, in addition to a tireless, constant enforcement of U.S. civil rights.

Overall, *White Men On Race* provides a candid survey of an important socioeconomic group – powerful, wealthy white men – and its perception of both African-Americans and overall racial division in American. The interviewees’ responses will affect different readers in different ways. For readers who have had exposure to discussions on race, readers who are minorities and have lived through some of the experiences touched on in the book, or readers who are “autopathic,” the men’s answers are often times expected or predictable and do not necessarily shed any new light. Nevertheless, regardless of who the book’s target audience is, all readers can benefit from Feagin and O’Brien’s work by relying on it as a source of motivation to raise the level of awareness and education on race in American.

ENDNOTES

* Jacqueline Lee is a first year law student at American University Washington College of Law.

² *Id* at 197.

³ *Id* at 64.

¹ JOE FEAGIN AND EILEEN O’BRIEN, *WHITE MEN ON RACE: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE SHAPING OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS*, at 85 (2003).